

Feminism In Principle And In Practice: Everywomans Books¹

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ABSTRACT

Victoria's Everywomans Bookstore has a continuous 21-year history as a successful feminist collective. This paper analyzes the shifting strategies that enable this collective's success.

RÉSUMÉ

Everywomans Books, une librairie à Victoria, présente l'exemple de la réussite d'une entreprise féministe de type collectif en place depuis 21 ans. Cet article analyse la faculté d'adaptation qui est à la source de cette réussite.

INTRODUCTION

The existence of feminist reading material is largely taken for granted today across much of the world, thanks to enormous amounts of time, work, passion and money invested on the part of thousands of women since the early 1970s. Feminist bookstores have significantly broadened our access to this reading material. The unfortunate reality these days, however, is that due to increasing social and economic pressures many of these bookstores have gone under due to bankruptcy or burnout. Others have restructured from unpaid collectives into worker-owned cooperatives or straightforward commercial enterprises. All are now vulnerable to corporate capitalism, both in terms of publishing and in retail sales. Pressures have come not only from economic constraints, but also and perhaps more devastatingly, from tensions within feminist communities. Despite these difficulties,

Everywomans Books, which opened in 1975 as a non-profit, collectively owned and run feminist bookstore in Victoria, British Columbia, is among a tiny number of feminist bookstores that has not only survived but has retained its collective, all-volunteer structure and runs entirely by volunteer labour.

CONFLICTS IN PRINCIPLE AND IN PRACTICE

As currently the longest-serving member of the Everywomans Collective, I must admit it is not immediately obvious to me which feminist principles actually do inform our practice. I suspect that we each have our own ideas. We spend very little time discussing feminist principles, as most of our time is taken up with the mechanics of running the business. A few feminist principles that might apply are:

-including a diversity of women in the

collective itself, in the books stocked, in the customers served, in the events promoted, in the authors highlighted by readings and signings;

- promoting books and authors that generate important ideas but limited sales;
- sharing power, including decision-making and skill-building, equally--or at least equitably--amongst all the collective;
- providing supportive services to all women who come through our doors.

The fact that the collective is ever-changing, incorporating new members and losing old members unpredictably every year, means that it is impossible to make long-term generalisations based on the composition at any one time.² The advantage is that we always have fresh perspectives; the disadvantage is that we can't build on the past and are always having to recreate basic information and experiences. We say that those who do the work should make the decisions and do not consider ourselves necessarily bound by decisions made by past collectives.

How much shelf space should we give to important books-- feminist classics, for example--that sell maybe one copy every two or three years? This question is at once intensely practical and intensely theoretical and it prompts a further question, what are we in business for? Since we rarely all agree on the precise balance of economic and political contingencies, we have to forge ways of making decisions on a daily basis and also on a more long-term basis.

At Everywomans, as elsewhere, decisions equal power. Our decision-making is decentralised and deliberately anarchic. Day-to-day decisions are made by the woman

on shift and can be unmade, or remade, by the next woman. (An example is the posting of community announcements. Our general principle is to post only those specific to women, but each collective member has a slightly different sense of what that means. So the Monday woman will post a flyer and the Tuesday woman will take it down as unsuitable.) When decisions need to be made by the whole collective, they are brought to our fortnightly meeting. (Cases of conflict between those who want to post a flyer and those who don't are also brought to meetings and settled by consensus.) Decisions implying far-reaching philosophical commitments are brought to a semi-annual weekend Retreat. (We are currently wondering whether using automatic debit cards would simply bring in more badly needed money and thus be a Good Thing or would hasten the control by international capital of everybody's life and thus be a Bad Thing.)

Structurally, everybody in the collective is equally empowered to make decisions. There is no central committee, no board, no behind-the-scenes power structure. There are, however, lots of informal imbalances of power. Newer members sometimes defer to older members. Very young and very old members sometimes are marginalised to the benefit of the slightly middle-aged. Those who spend more time in the store and do more work often speak with more authority and passion, and are more likely to be listened to. Increasingly, there are imbalances between those with lots of experience in feminist organising and those with less. With many Women's Studies students on the collective, there may be a gap between those seen as knowledgeable and

those seen as "merely" enthusiastic. An influx of young, brash, radical, bisexual, vegetarian, ecofeminist activists abruptly shifted the power differentials. Computerisation has brought a gap between the computer nerds and the techno-peasants.

The interesting and exciting thing, for me, is that the various axes of power tend to cancel each other out: each of us is relatively more powerful on some axes and relatively less powerful on others. The axes of power seem also to have little to do with the standard markers of feminist difference: class, race, and sexual identity. I think that diversity within our feminist communities is a lot more diverse than we often imagine and is experienced along a whole range of variables which we should resist always collapsing into predictable categories. The power differentials in Everywomans collective seem to balance out and to work as well as anything does. And with the turnover, if it doesn't work so well at one moment, it will probably be better--and it is bound to be different--in a few months.

CONCLUSION

I'm not sure there is a conclusion to be drawn here. The store has survived economically only because it doesn't have to provide anybody a living. We make just enough money to cover our expenses and put a little away for emergencies. We have survived socially because we are diverse enough to meet the needs of a broad customer base. We have survived politically because we subordinate ideology to the practical goal of keeping the store open and we avoid feminist sectarianism. (If we don't sell enough books, it doesn't matter how good our politics, we'll close down.) We have many problems and

unsolved dilemmas I've not touched on here, and I haven't conveyed the frequent sense of frustration on all our parts as a result of peoples' differing levels of commitment, skill, and energy.

In the next few years, when ever more women will be scrambling to make a living, I expect we will face huge challenges in our ability to retain collective members. I expect to see other bookstores carrying more titles in the more lucrative segments of feminist publishing while we make ever more difficult decisions about the less lucrative segments. In the face of these and other challenges, I expect we'll bumble along, as we have in the past. What sustains us over the hard times is a kind of old-fashioned Second Wave idealism, overlaid with the practical and theoretical experience gained over the past 21 years. With no board, no bosses or funders, no "them" to blame when times get hard, we rely on ourselves to come up with creative solutions to our problems. In all my many years of activism, I've never seen any organisation come closer than Everywomans Books to putting our feminist principles into daily practice.

ENDNOTES

1. The name is spelled without an apostrophe. Apparently this was decided at the very beginning, based on a political principle. Nobody remembers what the principle was (it must have something to do with the apostrophe being a sign of possession?), but we continue to spell it the way the Founding Mothers did.

2. We keep the collective at around 24 members, of whom 16-18 are active at any given time, the others being on declared leave of absence. We take applications continuously; prospective members are interviewed and trained when we need them. The training is fairly extensive, since we each work alone in the store. Four training sessions, followed by a solo shift, followed by a supervised shift, take place before a prospective member is considered eligible to join the collective. The decision is made by consensus, based on our judgement of the trainee's ability to adhere to our procedures, her interactions with customers, our sense of her reliability and general suitability.